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ABSTRACT

If counseling and guidance professionals are to improve the mental health of individuals and society, then they must carefully examine the relationship between mental health and technology. Healthy management of technological tools may be one of the most critical competencies a counseling professional can model and teach. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide all of the answers but to stimulate the discussion with some relevant perspectives in relation to awareness of technology's benefits and limitations and the growing need to manage technology wisely. In order to help people make choices about their use of technology, counselors must develop awareness of technology's benefits and limitations. The second step is to manage technology wisely. In order to do this individuals should: keep an internal locus of control around the use of technology; choose appropriate technologies wisely; draw boundaries around the use of technology; avoid measuring personal worth on the basis of the skills or competencies of others; and monitor impulse control and the need for immediate gratification and fascination with new technologies. (Contains 14 references and a list of 7 additional resources.) (MKA)

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Managing Technology Wisely: A New Counselor Competency

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On Thursday, July 29, 1999, Mark Barton, an Atlanta stock market day trader apparently upset over $105,000 in stock losses, opened fire in two brokerage offices, killing 9 people and wounding 13 others before taking his own life. The shootings took place in the offices of All Tech Investment Group, a firm that offers on-line Internet stock market trading to anyone who puts up at least $50,000 in equity to open an account.

Day trading is predicated on profit taking with large amounts of money and minimal shifts in stock prices. It has been characterized as "intense, volatile, and risky" and "at the center of the stampeding bull market that's mesmerizing Americans—sometimes at great financial and emotional cost" ("Day Trading," 1999). To cope with the stress inherent in day trading, All Tech employed a corporate psychotherapist to help traders. But that was not enough to stop Mark Barton.

Mark Barton's case is far more dramatic than most, but many of the stress factors that precipitated his violent outburst are becoming more and more everyday occurrences. The benefits of using technology to gain advantage—and the risks encountered by doing so—are becoming more and more a part of the human experience in this technological era.

Although technology has dramatically changed our way of life, the question remains: Are we better off, as individuals and as a

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society, with what people indiscriminately refer to as technological advances? The question was probably asked as early as the 15th century when Benedictine monks woke to the sound of newly invented clock bells, replacing the more natural rhythm of the morning sunrise. The question has also probably been asked as each new technology was invented, whether the Model T (and its pollution and the 1920s version of road rage), electricity (with its electrocutions and unsightly wires), or the telephone (with its recorded message menus or its autodial telemarketing).

Some innovations have had severe and disastrous results. Early enthusiasm over the discovery of asbestos, silicone implants, and the pesticide DDT faded when their unintended, harmful side effects became known. In 1999, the gasoline additive MTBE was legally mandated for use by the state of California as an air pollution deterrent. Soon, however, MTBE became the catalyst for closure of one third of the wells in the Lake Tahoe basin as it was discovered to be a carcinogen that had leached its way into the state's drinking water supply.

Are we better off? The accelerated emergence of technologies in the last half of the 20th century has made the question even more pertinent. As more and more of our daily lives depend upon microchip-enabled media such as computers, fax machines, cell phones, e-mail, and the Internet, our lives have paradoxically become both more simplified and more complicated. Although these inventions are purported to save time, we now try to accomplish more tasks or acquire more electronic "toys" as a result. One result is that the United States now has longer work hours and less leisure time than any other industrialized nation.

If counseling and guidance professionals are to improve the mental health of individuals and society, then they must carefully examine the relationship between mental health and technology. Indeed, healthy management of technological tools may be one of the most critical competencies a counseling professional can model and teach. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide all of the answers but to stimulate the discussion with some relevant perspectives in relation to awareness of technology's benefits and limitations and our growing need to manage technology wisely.

STEP ONE: DEVELOPING AWARENESS

Guidance and *counseling* have been defined as the processes of helping people make important choices that affect their lives in both values and changes (Gladding, 1996). We make choices daily about our values and behavior in the use of technology, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. We choose to answer a telephone, log on to the Internet, respond to an e-mail, subscribe to a listserv, send a fax, or watch television.

How can counselors begin to help people make their choices wisely? A first step in the process is awareness. Becoming aware that we are indeed making a choice to use (or not use) a particular technology, coupled with awareness of the potential benefits and limitations of using that technology, can lead to a healthy questioning of the relative worth of each technological tool in a given time and place.

Awareness of Benefits

Technology's benefits have increased rapidly and include psychological benefits.

Expanded Benefits at Faster Speeds

The widespread benefits of technological innovation have been many. They include financial gain to many in technology-rich nations, increased access to information, increased speed of information access, democratization of information access, increased learning acquisition, increased productivity, increased leisure, increased choices, increased motivation for learning, increased mobility, reduction of routine tasks, and increased connectedness with less isolation.

Psychological Benefits

Another benefit, psychologically, might be intensified emotional relationships. Gergen (1991) speculated that technology can intensify the emotional level of many relationships by changing the traditional community patterns of communication. Without technology, traditional relationships in traditional communities move toward a moderate leveling of emotional intensity, as married couples might

replace "exciting romance" with "comfortable depth." Moreover, in traditional face-to-face communities, there is a high degree of informal surveillance, in which gossip and community norms keep novel and/or deviant behavior in short supply. With technology, however, Gergen observed that neither of these constraints operate. Thus with expanded telecommunications and travel options, the once quiet evening at home is now replaced by a parade of faces, information, and intrusions.

> One can scarcely settle into a calming rut, because who one is and the cast of "significant others" are in continuous motion. Further, because relationships range far and wide, largely through various electronic means, they cannot easily be supervised by others. (pp. 60–61)

With a broader pool of relationships to draw upon in cyberspace, it is not surprising that some find stronger relationships in their cybercommunity that in their geographically proximate neighborhoods.

The autonomy offered by technology may encourage more risk taking. Some clients are more encouraged to seek counseling through the Internet, choosing to avoid resistance associated with more traditional face-to-face encounters. The use of e-mail in one case allowed a Latino university student to bypass likely prejudice by Anglo vineyard owners when he conducted informational career interviews on vitacultural careers through e-mail (Casey, 1998). The student was likely to have been denied access to the owners had he made the requests in person; using e-mail, however, he was issued numerous invitations for onsite visits.

Awareness of Limitations

The limitations of technology do not always present themselves amidst the initial excitement over innovation. Alfred Nobel's enthusiasm with his discovery of dynamite only later turned sour when its destructive capability with weapons became evident.

Volti (1988) contended that "one of the most pleasant myths about technology is that it can work its wonders without altering existing social arrangements." Indeed, the social and economic landscape has been dramatically altered.

The Technogap

One example of the technological age's dramatically altered landscape is the polarization of the technogap between the haves and have nots (Casey, 1998). As the creators of technology create more power, wealth, and leisure for themselves, the users of technology are left with even less power, wealth, and leisure. This has occurred both within the population of technology-rich nations as well as between nations that have and have not benefited from technology.

Loss of Worker Security

Another example of the technological age's dramatically altered landscape is the decline of security in the workforce. Technological tools allow fewer people to do the same work at more efficient speeds with less need for midlevel hierarchy. Thus midlevel workers are often the first casualty in corporate mergers, relocation, and downsizing. As a result, job insecurity and an ongoing need for reinvention have become survival skills for the vast majority of workers (Feller, 1997; Rifkin, 1995).

Indeed, the changing nature of the workforce due to technology has led to paradoxical dilemmas. Strikes for higher wages by farm workers have been an economic catalyst to invent new technologies for planting and harvesting. Fierce strikes by labor organizations over job protection against outsourcing or global relocations have led to more robotic replacements.

Less Skilled Workers

Work tasks that used to require specialized knowledge now utilize technology to make the end user interchangeable. For example, a company of temporary workers now exists to supply "overflow" telephone operators when the help lines for companies like Microsoft become overloaded. These overflow operators, who are not trained technical employees, use a computer screen tutorial to ask certain questions of the caller and, depending on the response, go through a "menu tree" of further questions and responses leading to help-line suggestions. (When all else fails, the operator is instructed to inform the caller to "turn off the computer for 20 minutes and then, if still not working, call back.")

Likewise, in the world of managed care for mental health insurance, minimally trained phone receptionists are prompted to ask selected questions when prior approval for health care is requested. The level of professional (master's or doctoral) approved for referral is dependent on key words the patient states to indicate level of severity of his or her problem.

Decreased Benefits

The benefits of employing part-time, interchangeable, low-level employees are numerous. The wage scale can often be less than $10 per hour. With laws requiring that health benefits be provided to workers who are employed over 19 hours per week, companies can save the cost of benefits by employing more part-time employees. Alternately, contracting out for temporary employees previously employed in-house can also eliminate the cost of benefits. These trends have given rise to a dramatic increase of workers who work two or three part-time jobs and who comprise a large number of the working poor. The largest employer in the world is now a temporary agency called Manpower.

The fear that the interchangeability of workers and the elimination of the middle man will spread into higher education has been voiced by David Van Nuys (1995) in an on-line treatise entitled *Distance Learning and the Demise of the Professoriate*. Van Nuys, a self-described technophile who has designed and taught a course, "Computer Applications in Psychology," has warned that "the Costco-ization of American education" will be appealing for those who want to minimize cost and maximize convenience by offering courses that provide credits and degrees via distance education—and, in the process, lose the essence of the pedagogy. "We are living in a time of minimal specification" (Van Nuys & Gomes, 1995).

Health Problems

Health problems have perhaps been the largest negative side effect of the technological era. Direct problems, such as physical pain from prolonged activity on a keyboard, have spawned new industries. We have products that promise ergonomic aid, laws that mandate ergonomic safety, medical specialists to treat repetitive

stress injuries (such as carpel tunnel syndrome), and attorneys who specialize in prosecuting offending companies that fail to prevent injuries or fail to support its victims in the aftermath.

Indirect health problems can also be traced to technology-related stress. Muscular, digestive, and cardiovascular systems can all be affected. Early warning signs, gone unheeded, can develop into long-term and even life-threatening illnesses.

Four out of 10 Americans view their jobs as the largest cause of stress in their lives, according to a report released in 1999 by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. The report also noted that 75% of employees believe today's worker has more on-the-job stress than workers in the previous generation ("The Pressure Cooker," 1999).

Addiction

One population that seems particularly vulnerable to the health risks of technostress are those with Type A behaviors (Friedman & Rosenman, 1974) and those with a tendency toward either obsessive compulsive behaviors and/or addictions. College and community mental health centers report a dramatic rise in clients who report moderate or severe computer addiction. Computers offer a strong magnet with their immediate gratification and immediate reinforcement. Young (1996), in a study of 496 heavy on-line users, suggested that Internet addiction is similar to gambling addiction because it involves failed impulse control without involving an intoxicant. According to this study, the use of the Internet can disrupt an individual's academic, social, financial, and occupational life as do other well-documented addictions such as pathological gambling, eating disorders, and alcoholism.

Individuals who have few or no social skills find refuge in the closed world of computer addiction. The high degree of control that comes from writing computer code, controlling a mouse and keyboard, or, for that matter, controlling channels with a television remote control offers a safe haven for those who find human interaction stressful. Howard Besser (1995), who studied the social impacts of the Internet, stated that the pull of interactive media is more powerful than television or old-style video games, not unlike the pull of gambling. A sedentary lifestyle and/or desensitization to

the human experience are two additional complications associated with technology addiction.

Computer addiction takes a heavy toll on health, school, and work. It also exacts a toll on marriages and families. Maya Sullivan has emphasized that

> [computer addicts] are so drawn to the on-line world that they spend as much as 40 hours a week compulsively tapping away on a computer keyboard. Unwilling to pull the electronic plug, they lose sleep, forget to eat, leave the dishes unwashed, shirk work and even neglect their children. ("Virtual World," 1996)

In Silicon Valley, California, marriage and family therapists have developed practices that specialize in technology-related disorders. The intense pressure to meet a deadline, develop a new product quickly, stay ahead of the competition, or meet stockholders' expectation for quarterly profits add pragmatic rationalizations for the addict.

Decreased Leisure

Technology has challenged traditional notions of leisure. The average work week during the 1990s has lengthened in the United States to well beyond the traditional 40 hours for full-time employees. It is not uncommon to find a new breed of worker who is willing to work overtime for added income for months or years, only to take an extended vacation of months and years and then return to a new job at a new company. Recognizing the high level of transience and low level of loyalty, employers have replaced traditional retirement plans with transportable pensions whereby the employee can remove accumulated contributions from their prior employer and roll them over into the next employer's pension program.

Another effect of technology on leisure has been the blurring of the boundaries between work and play. Workers check their e-mail while traveling on vacation; they also play computer games and send e-mail jokes while on the job. Cell phone users respond to work issues while having a meal or backpacking in the mountains. Telecommuting has emerged as one answer to traffic congestion. Controls on the use of intrusive technologies are developing: con-

certs now begin with a request that pagers be turned to pulse mode; states are discussing traffic laws restricting the usage of cell phones.

Multitasking

Performing multiple tasks concurrently, once the bane of only those labeled Type A, has become so common that multitasking is actually assigned to many workers, adding to everyday stress. Answering a phone with a headset or speakerphone while using hands on a keyboard or cash register is commonplace. Monitoring thousands of stocks simultaneously using sophisticated software is now expected of any financial adviser. And with market trading now including round-the-clock global monitoring of the markets in Tokyo, Frankfurt, London, and New York, there seems to be little respite from stress other than exhaustion or death. The New York Stock Exchange, in 1999, has decided to extend its hours to accommodate west coast traders (and, not incidentally, compete for market share against west-coast-based NASDAQ companies).

STEP TWO: MANAGING TECHNOLOGY WISELY

Becoming aware of the benefits and pitfalls created by technological innovation is only a first step. A necessary sequel is changing cognitive and behavioral strategies to manage personal use of technology wisely and then, after modeling wise technology usage, infusing the teaching of wise technology management into counseling activities with clients.

Consider the following guidelines as starting points for evaluation and application:

1. **Keep an internal locus of control around the use of technology.** It is easy to jump into many new technologies because of peer pressure or market hype. Resist. Ask if the new technology is really necessary. Many upgrades of software and hardware are intended to enrich the producer, not the consumer. If you can accomplish tasks reasonably well given current computer configurations, sit back and enjoy them.
2. **Choose appropriate technologies wisely.** You can be far more efficient and effective with judicious use of technology.

Knowing how to tap into a database effectively, for example, can save days, weeks, months, or even years of time.

The operative word here is *appropriate*. Sometimes using a lower tech photocopier accomplishes the same result as scanning a photo into digital format, opening it up through photo editing software, and printing it out on a laser printer. Similarly, a simple overhead transparency can sometimes accomplish the same result as transporting a laptop and projection system. If you are using instant messaging on your computer screen to exchange words with a person nearby, a phone call or even personal visit may be more efficient.

3. **Draw boundaries around your use of technology.** If your goal is to have leisure, resist the urge to turn on the cell phone. It may be wiser to check your messages on e-mail or voice mail only at selected times of the day, not as they arrive. Technology is a tool, not a lifestyle, so keep it balanced with exercise, spirituality, friendship, humor, relationships, and other essential elements of life (E. Rust, personal communication, July 8, 1999).

   Risk a little techno-ridicule once in a while. Although some of us have learned ways to discourage telephone solicitors, we still feel compelled to read and answer every e-mail we get or to copy friends we haven't seen in years with the most trivial messages.

4. **Do not measure your worth on the basis of what skills or competencies the person next to you possesses.** "Many times in putting this publication together I've thought about all the things I can't do, or haven't done, or choose not to do, which makes me feel totally incompetent. I've never downloaded any free software, I've never played games other than Solitaire, I've never entered a chat room, I break out in a sweat every time I have to call the Help desk, etc. However, I also know that others consider me a computer guru; it is all a matter of perspective" (John Bloom, personal communication, June 5, 1999).

5. **Monitor your impulse control, need for immediate gratification, and fascination with new technologies.** Internet/World Wide Web communication, coupled with faster connections and faster computer processing rates, have enabled instantaneous connectivity to take place. It can be a seductive

process, especially when graphics, sound, and other multimedia enhancements offer multisensory gratification. But we must neither confuse form with substance nor let form subtract from substance.

CONCLUSION

The benefits of technology are the driving force behind its innovation, but the costs associated with it are often evident only as the new technologies come on line. Tragic incidents, like the Barton shootings in Atlanta, can be important wake-up calls for counselors to examine closely how the human interface with technology must be cautiously approached.

Technology has changed our way of life. It offers us tools that have both benefits and limitations. If counseling and guidance professionals are to improve the mental health of individuals and, ultimately, our society, we must carefully examine the nature of our technology usage. Awareness, modeling, and teaching of wise technology usage strategies are recommended steps in the process.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Internet Addiction Diagnosis and Support Group (http://www.cybernothing.org/jdfalk/media-coverage/archive/msg01305.html)
- Internet Addiction Overview (http://webreview.com/wr/pub/96/04/08/tipsheet/index.html)
- Mental Health Discussion Page (http://webreview.com/wr/pub/96/11/29/hour/index.html)
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